

Settlers, Indians fought near

Stevenson in 1856

Every Monday during the year-long celebration of Washington's Centennial The Columbian will publish a story looking at an aspect of Clark County's history. The celebration winds up Nov. 11, 1989, when the state will be 100 years old.

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The Columbian

Southwest Washington's only major war between Indians and white settlers occurred just downstream from the town of Stevenson. It was a short but bloody affair.

In 1855, Washington Territory was a smoldering volcano, ready to erupt in violence at any time. The many Indian tribes, loosely united under the leadership of such great chiefs as Kamiakin of the Yakimas and Peu-Peu-Mox-Mox of the Walla Wallas, conducted a council of war and vowed to stop the migration of white settlers and miners who were forcing the Indians from their ancestral lands.

Although several killings preceded it, the actual catalyst that led to the Indian war of 1856 was the murder of A.J. Bolon, an Indian agent from Vancouver, who had his

Rains) and the Upper Cascades, at the base of a small hill about one mile west of Stevenson.

The band of Yakima and Klickitat Indian raiders struck without warning on March 26, 1856, attacking all three settlements simultaneously.

The military had no troops at the Upper Landing when the attack occurred at 8:30 a.m. Shooting from high ground nearby, the Indians kept up a steady fire on the civilians who had sought sanctuary in the Bradford and Co. store.

The steamer Mary, the first steamboat that ran between The Dalles and the Upper Landing, was tied to the dock when the battle began. Under a hail of bullets, the ship's crew got the fires started and Hardin Chenoweth, lying on the floor of the pilot house, backed the Mary out into the river and headed upstream to The Dalles for help.

The sawmill at Upper Landing and several houses were burned by the Indians, but an attempt to burn the store with 40 besieged settlers inside was thwarted when a fire on the roof was extinguished with brine from a pork barrel.



throat cut by several Indians, one of whom was a nephew of Kamiakin.

After Bolon's slaying, the Army made several punitive raids against the Indians north of The Dalles and around Yakima, but the results of the skirmishes were inconclusive.

The strategic importance of the area from Stevenson downriver through Lower Cascades had been recognized in the early 1850s when the U.S. Army established military posts throughout the Northwest. The Army moved into the Cascades area in 1855 to construct a military portage road and to establish forts at the Lower Cascades, the Middle Cascades (Fort

Meanwhile, other Indians had laid siege to Fort Rains, a small blockhouse built on a high point of land on the river bank about a quarter-mile upstream from the present Bonneville Dam. Despite casualties, the small contingent of soldiers held out until help arrived the next day.

At the Lower Cascades, no lives were lost, as the settlers fled downriver to Vancouver. However, the attacking Indians seized the village and burned it to the ground.

Early on March 27, the steamship Belle was dispatched from Fort Vancouver with a company of soldiers, led by Lt. Philip Sheridan. On the way upstream, Sheridan's force met the refugees from the Lower Landing, and they were taken aboard the Belle. At the lower settlement, the military contingent engaged in a spirited battle, taking the pressure off Fort Rains.

In the meantime, the Mary had reached The Dalles and a force of 250 men under Col. George Wright set off downriver to break the siege. The force landed at the Upper Landing on March 28 to find

the Indians already had fled.

After the battle, the Army built Fort Lugenbeel on a small hill overlooking the scene of the Upper Landing conflict. Traces of the old fort still can be seen and an historic marker tells of the battle.

Fort Rains remained occupied for another two or three years and Fort Cascades, at the Lower Landing, was evacuated on June 11, 1861.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the three blockhouses at the Cascades were abandoned and gradually rotted away.

Contemporary reports listed 17 white settlers and soldiers killed during the battles, along with an unknown number of Indians. The chief and eight other members of the Cascade tribe were hanged without benefit of trial by the military at about the site of the present Stevenson Co-ply mill. In retrospect, it appears the nine might well have been innocent victims who had taken no part in the fighting.